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Inside the CIA

Frederick resident recalls the early days

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Most Americans would be thrilled at the chance to just shake hands with a President of the United States, but a Frederick resident has not only met a President, but has worked with and briefed five of them.

This same man was also appointed by one of those presidents as one of the first members of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

When Meredith P. "Dave" Davidson says, "I'm going to write a book about my experiences," the only question that immediately comes to mind is, "What highly classified, top-secret, intriguing spy-like material will you uncover?"

But, when, Davidson, 63, writes his book, there won't be any secrets exposed. What will be in his book is a fascinating look at the career of a man who was at the forefront of a long list of historical events from 1942, when he was an honor graduate and commissioned second lieutenant, USAR (ROTC) from Henderson State College, to 1974, when he retired from active duty with the CIA.

"I feel like one of the luckiest guys who's ever lived," he reflects, comfortable in his roomy Rosemont Avenue home in Frederick. "What a period of time it was to live in. I've touched every facet of this country's history you can (during his CIA career). I was just at the right place at the right time." (Davidson also got to work with Bob Hope and Jack Benny by being at the right place at the right time).

Davidson began his career by participating in combat action in Guadalcanal, Rendova, New Georgia, where he received the Purple Heart, Bougainville and the Philippines during 1943-44. While recuperating from minor combat wounds, he was assigned as the officer in charge of several USO Camp Show tours in the South Pacific area, which featured Bob Hope and Jack Benny.

The shows consisted of Hope, harmonica player Tony Ramono, movie ac-

tress Carole Landis, singer and movie star Frances Langford, and plenty of gorgeous show girls.

"They were crazy," Davidson says of Hope and Benny. "Hope would laugh at mistakes; he was never serious. Benny was; he would worry."

A favorite tale involving Hope that Davidson recalls deals with an aircraft flying low and jumping around because of turbulence. Hope came to the back of the plane and was told how rough it was. "Rough back here?" Hope cracked, "It was so rough up front, the automatic pilot bailed out! 'Hey — put that in!'"

Trying to lighten up a tense situation, "Hope had been struck with inspiration. The joke stayed in Hope's act for years, Davidson recalls, and four years later Davidson attended a radio show at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington, D.C. Hope was there, and giving a nod to Davidson, he told the 'automatic pilot joke.'

After 1944-45, Davidson graduated from the Army Special Services School at Washington and Lee University, and then served with the U.S. Occupation Forces in Japan during 1945. He then graduated from the Strategic Intelligence School in Washington, D.C., in 1946. From there he went to the Pentagon, where he was a staff officer in the Office of Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence, for the Army. He was released from active duty as a major in 1949 and joined the ranks of history with the CIA.

He joined the agency as a military intelligence specialist in 1949 and had duties specializing in indications intelligence; he also contributed to daily and weekly CIA intelligence publications. Davidson was the first CIA member of the Watch Committee of the United States Intelligence Board (USIB), and during 1950-51 served as military intelligence briefer for the director of Central Intelligence, Gen. Walter Bedell Smith, a friend of Dwight Eisenhower and Harry Truman.

Next came promotions to assistant to the director of Central Intelligence and special assistant to the deputy director for Intelligence. From 1950-53, Davidson assisted and accompanied Smith in briefings of President Truman and the National Security Council on a weekly basis.

"I think Truman was one of the greatest presidents we ever had," Davidson suggests. "He was decisive — as hard as that decision was to drop that bomb, I think he ever worried about it. He knew it was the right decision, he felt it."

For two years in the mid-1950s, Davidson was the chief of the Presentation Division at the CIA, and his duties included weekly briefing of the White House staff and all outgoing U.S. ambassadors. He was designated in 1953 to plan, set up and later operate a CIA-sponsored briefing room in the White House for the president and his senior staff. Davidson continued as a chief of the Military Division of the CIA and for one year as editor of the "Situation Summary" a weekly, all-source intelligence publication for the president and other senior government officials.

Throughout the '60s and until his early retirement in 1974, Davidson continued this pace, going from one high-ranking position to another. During this time, he was one of the most high-level men in the CIA, working closely with the directors of the agency.

He mainly dealt with "special intelligence," most of which he can't talk about because of security reasons. "The methodology of gathering the information cannot be disclosed. The substantive part of the information may become dated, but the methodology may not be dated. The biggest problem of intelligence planning is long-range estimating. The CIA is very good on this. Fortunately, we can't brag on what we're successful on."

Davidson said the "methodology of gathering information is very secret. It's been alluded to, guessed at, but never cracked." Many times, he admits, there were conflicts between what he felt was right and what the agency had to do. "When you're in that position, the people (in the agency) would question the fact — you just could not let politics sway you. The job was to provide the facts, unabated, non-restrictive, and without opinion."

The Truman era is remembered by Davidson as the "highest morale of any time. There was a morale in the CIA that I've never been around anywhere else. It is true that the agency was criticized for its recruiting program. The CIA didn't accept anyone outside of the top 10-20 percent of their class;

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